

Dismantling Systemic Organizational Oppression: Making Institutional Commitment to Culturally Based Fraternities & Sororities at Predominantly White Institutions

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Fraternities and sororities have always maintained some level of proximity to institutions of higher education. The earliest fraternities were founded on or in proximity to campuses as student life evolved. Given the racist and patriarchal norms that informed society at the formation of these groups, little investment was made in groups that were not white, wealthy, and male. Even predominantly white women's organizations struggled to exhibit the value of the co-educational experience and importance of single-sex spaces for themselves. That historical investment in whiteness at the expense of others undergirds much of the failures we see on college and university campuses today. It is no surprise the advent of culturally based fraternities and sororities would not register within and often confound the higher education landscape.

Insidious exclusion of blacks to overtly racist membership clauses of historically/predominantly white fraternities and sororities were a manifestation of investments in racism and whiteness. The establishment of historically black fraternities and sororities in the early 1900s were often in response to institutionalized racism. These organizations ensured black collegians could find community in their post-secondary context. In the same tradition, Latinx, Asian, multicultural, and indigenous fraternal organizations developed to serve their communities. We would also see the growth of organizations committed to space for varied sexual identities and genders. All the while, institutions maintained an arm's length relationship at best. In our experiences as professionals, we can recall dialogues about exclusion from yearbooks, lack of institutional recognition, inequitable resource allocation, and disparate policies/expectations.

With this context in mind, it is important to consider how inequity might exist within your office and institution. If we desire to move away from perpetuating oppressive structures and systemic racism on our campuses, we must engage in a paradigm shift. One essential paradigm shift is to move further away from dichotomous to diunital worldviews (Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2019). Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller (2019) describe dichotomous reasoning as a worldview that dictates either/or thinking, which leads to hierarchical mindset where one is often superior to the other. They describe diunital reasoning as a worldview that emphasizes both/and thinking, which gives space for contradictory or incompatible ideas to co-exist.

We have to acknowledge that we can be doing both good work in our respective fraternity/sorority communities, and perpetuating systemic racism and oppression of culturally-based fraternities and sororities (CBFSs). Institutions may be doing great work in reducing the risk and liabilities of their institutions while also failing to provide programmatic and

developmental support to the growth of CBFs. The refusal to address this failure sends a clear message that only organizations with historically white roots matter and other organizations, founded because of the lack of access to historically white organizations, do not matter. When institutions do fail to invest in CBFs, their organizations are under-served and underdeveloped on your campus.

Lack of support for CBFs can also show up in the form of which staff are situated to advise and support culturally based fraternities and sororities. Staff who lack cultural competency also do a disservice to and perpetuate systemic racism and oppression of CBFs. What often comes because of a lack of cultural awareness in staff are students in these groups who are victims of macroaggressions from staff who may mean well. Over time, students in CBFs who experience constant macroaggressions from staff might also come to not enjoy the interactions with your office.

Promising Practices

At the 2019 AFA Annual Meeting, the profession was challenged to address our systemically racist past through several recommended actions (Harper, 2019). Although the work of addressing equity and inclusion in the fraternity/sorority community is an ongoing process, there are some promising practices. These promising practices center CBFs more in our work and seek to dismantle hundreds of years of overt and systemic racism and organizational oppression that still exists in many fraternity/sorority communities. The below practices are nowhere near an exhaustive list of practices that can work to dismantle systemic oppression of CBFs.

- **Institutional Financial Investment in Programs:** How is your budget utilized to address inequity? Are you investing financially in the development of your CBFs? There has to be a willingness to make an institutional financial investment in CBFs. CBFs lack the financial resources to be as visible as historically white organizations. This lack of resources is largely due to their smaller membership size. Their membership has historically been, and still is, smaller because of being “othered” by the broader messaging about fraternity/sorority membership on campuses.
- **Full-Time Staff Support:** Consider the manner in which your office is structured. Are there dedicated full-time professionals serving your CBFs or is it a rotating door of graduate assistants? There are ways to allow graduate students exposure and development without sacrificing the very necessary continuity of support and institutional knowledge CBFs require. Graduate students can be great resources in fraternity/sorority life. However, it sends a negative message to CBFs councils when they are advised by temporary graduate assistant staff and/or staff who do not have

- the same institutional time. We argue CBFS councils need more support to undo the years of institutional oppression that has been a result of their founding.
- **Facilities & Space:** Are you providing a foundation for their presence on campus in the same fashion many institutions and their alumni have for historically and predominantly white organizations? Think of place and space. Dedicated space has the capacity to enhance students' sense of belonging within the campus context. Are there spaces on campus where the prominent placement of these organizations' brands will enhance their visibility? Banners along the main campus walkway or street? Perhaps plots for your NPHC students? What about a multipurpose room decorated with artifacts and highlighting their histories? There need to be creative ways to create physical manifestations of CBFSs on campuses. These physical manifestations can be either residential space or programming space.
 - **Staff Cultural Competency & Humility about CBFSs:** Do all staff members know the history, context, and current standard operating procedures of culturally based fraternities and sororities on your campus? If the staff responsible for advising CBFSs on your campus left, could any other staff pick up the office support for these organizations in the interim? Staff working in fraternity/sorority offices must have the cultural competency and humility to be able to create welcoming environments for students affiliated with CBFSs.

Reflection

A lack of institutional investment in culturally based fraternity/sorority life is a manifestation of racism and white supremacy. Therefore, we must consistently reflect on how program and staffing structures in fraternity/sorority life/student affairs areas perpetuate and/or deconstruct systems of oppression against CBFSs. Therefore, the following questions guide self-reflection on ways to continue to audit barriers and ways to deconstruct whiteness in our fraternity/sorority life programs.

1. As fraternity/sorority advisors (FSAs), what are our ethical obligations to advocate for, support, and engage students affiliated with CBFSs?
2. How well do you or other FSAs know students who are affiliated with CBFSs?
3. How competent are you and other FSAs on your campus about how CBFSs operate?
4. In what ways does your office and/or institution financially support CBFSs on your campus?
5. What ways can your office and/or institution better support CBFSs?

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